

# **Charles Wilkes**

## **A Register of His Papers in the Library of Congress**

**Prepared by Joseph Sullivan**

**Revised by Patrick Kerwin**



**Manuscript Division, Library of Congress**

**Washington, D.C.**

**1998**

Contact information: <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/mss/address.html>

**Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress  
Manuscript Division, 2002**

**2004-08-17 converted from EAD 1.0 to EAD 2002**

## Collection Summary

**Title:** Papers of Charles Wilkes

**Span Dates:** 1607-1959

**Bulk Dates:** (bulk 1841-1865)

**ID No.:** MSS45716

**Creator:** Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877

**Size:** 6,500 items; 45 containers plus 1 oversize; 18 linear feet; 29 microfilm reels

**Language:** Collection material in English

**Repository:** Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Abstract:** Naval officer and explorer. Official and family correspondence, journals and diaries, legal and financial papers, autobiography and other writings, scientific notebooks, maps, and printed material relating to Wilkes's command of an expedition to the Antarctic, Hawaii and various other Pacific islands, and the northwest coast of the United States; his work in Washington preparing and publishing information collected by the expedition; and his capture of J. M. Mason and John Slidell in the Trent affair (1861) and command of the James River Flotilla and West India Squadron during the Civil War.

## Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### Names:

Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877  
Agassiz, Louis, 1807-1873--Correspondence  
Bolton, William Compton, d. 1849--Correspondence  
Dana, James Dwight, 1813-1895--Correspondence  
Drayton, Joseph--Correspondence  
Gray, Asa, 1810-1888--Correspondence  
Mason, J. M. (James Murray), 1798-1871  
McClellan, George Brinton, 1826-1885--Correspondence  
Slidell, John, 1793-1871  
Stuart, Fred D.--Correspondence  
Welles, Gideon, 1802-1878--Correspondence  
Wilkes, Eliza--Correspondence  
Wilkes, Jane--Correspondence  
Wilkes, Jane Renwick, d. 1843--Correspondence  
Wilkes, John, 1827-1908--Correspondence  
Wilkes, Mary Lynch Bolton--Correspondence  
Wilkes family  
United States. Navy. James River Flotilla  
United States. Navy. Potomac River Flotilla  
United States. Navy. West India Squadron  
United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842)

### Subjects:

Astronomy  
Maps  
Meteorology--Observations  
Scientific expeditions--Antarctica  
Scientific expeditions--Hawaii  
Scientific expeditions--Oceania  
Tides  
Trent Affair, Nov. 8, 1861  
Antarctica--Discovery and exploration  
Hawaii--Discovery and exploration

Oceania--Discovery and exploration  
United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Naval operations

**Occupations:**

Explorers  
Naval officers

## Administrative Information

**Provenance:**

The papers of Charles Wilkes, naval officer and explorer, were given to the Library of Congress chiefly by Rosalee Lockwood-Jones, Mrs. M. L. Hull, and C. Denby Wilkes between 1921 and 1964.

**Processing History:**

The papers of Charles Wilkes were arranged and described in 1975. This register was revised in 1998.

**Copyright Status:**

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Charles Wilkes is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

**Microfilm:**

A microfilm edition of part of these papers is available on twenty-six reels. Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan.

**Preferred Citation:**

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, Charles Wilkes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

## Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1798, Apr. 3	Born, New York, N.Y.
1815	Entered the merchant marine
1818	Appointed midshipman
1826	Married Jane Jeffrey Renwick (died 1843) Promoted to lieutenant
1833	Headed the Depot of Charts and Instruments, Washington, D.C., which later became the Naval Observatory
1838-1842	Commanded an exploring expedition into the Antarctic, islands of the Pacific Ocean, and the American northwest coast
1843-1863	On special duty, chiefly in Washington, D.C., preparing for publication of information gathered from the exploring expedition
1845	Published <i>Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition</i> (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard. 5 vols.)

1849	Published <i>Western America</i> (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard. 130 pp.)
1851	Published <i>Meteorology</i> (Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman. 76 pp.)
1854	Married Mary H. Lynch Bolton
1857	Published <i>Theory of Zodiacal Light</i> (Philadelphia: C. Sherman & Son, Printers. 16 pp.)
1858	Published <i>Hydrography</i> (Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman. 514 pp.)
1859	Published <i>On the Circulation of the Oceans</i> (Philadelphia. 24 pp.) and <i>Report on the Examination of the Deep River District, North Carolina</i> ([Washington, D.C.]: 29 pp.)
1861	While in command of the <i>San Jacinto</i> , halted the British mail steamer <i>Trent</i> and forcibly removed Confederate commissioners James M. Mason and John Slidell
1862	Placed in command of the James River Flotilla; transferred to the command of the Potomac River Flotilla; later commanded the West India Squadron
1863	Recalled to Washington, D.C.
1864	Court-martialed
1866	Commissioned rear admiral on the retired list
1877, Feb. 8	Died, Washington, D.C.

## Scope and Content Note

The papers of Charles Wilkes (1798-1877) span the years 1607-1959, with the bulk of the material between 1841 and 1865. The collection contains [family](#), [official](#), and [general correspondence](#) of Charles Wilkes, letterbooks of Wilkes and of two other United States naval officers, [journals and diaries](#), a manuscript [autobiography](#), scientific tracts and notes detailing weather and tidal observations, genealogical charts, newspaper clippings, Confederate currency, and printed matter. There are also marriage and building contracts, leases, inventories, promissory notes, trust agreements, and debt records dating from the seventeenth century that relate to the [Wilkes family](#) in England and America.

The papers illustrate much of the career of Charles Wilkes, including his command of the [exploring expedition](#) of 1838-1842, which engaged in surveys and exploration of the Antarctic, islands in the Pacific Ocean, and the northwest coast of the United States. The collection also covers Wilkes's controversial seizure of Confederate commissioners James M. Mason and John Slidell aboard the British mail steamer *Trent* in 1861. Wilkes's other duties while an officer in the United States Navy, however, are more thoroughly documented. Notebooks, observation records, and correspondence relating to the exploring expedition are present in the papers, but much more documentation relates to his special duty in Washington, D.C., 1843-1861, when he consolidated the scientific data gathered on the mission and prepared his narrative of the voyage together with other scientific volumes for publication. With these publications came a measure of fame and recognition, not only as an explorer but also as a nautical scientist.

Wilkes's capture of the *Trent*, which overshadowed other less publicized services performed by him during the Civil War, is chiefly reflected in his correspondence for the period June 1861-June 1862, which contains letters from committees honoring him and letters indicating favorable public reaction. More vividly portrayed are Wilkes's commands in 1862 of the James and Potomac River flotillas and of the West India Squadron operating near the Bahamas against Confederate commerce destroyers. The [General Correspondence](#) and [Letterbooks](#) series contain an exchange of letters between Gideon Welles, George Brinton

McClellan, and Wilkes touching upon the military operations of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. Scattered references throughout the papers relate to Wilkes's [business](#) interests in the South, especially in North Carolina.

A relatively large segment of the correspondence pertains to the Wilkes family. Included in the [Family Correspondence](#) series are letters of Charles Wilkes, his son John, daughters Jane and Eliza, his wives, Jane Renwick and Mary Lynch Bolton, and cousins and other family members. Of a personal nature, these letters chronicle family celebrations and tragedies as well as mirror the pre-Civil War activities and interests of a financially secure American family.

Of particular interest are Wilkes's daily records in the [Journals and Diaries](#) series recording events of special interest and supplementing those periods lacking in correspondence. In addition to the journals, Wilkes's autobiography provides a particularly rich source of information relating to his career and personal life.

Contained in the [Miscellany](#) series are three official letterbooks of two United States naval officers and acquaintances of Charles Wilkes. The volumes belonged to Captain William B. Finch, who in 1818 was in charge of the *Independence*, Wilkes's first duty station as a midshipman, and to William Compton Bolton, the first husband of Wilkes's second wife, Mary Lynch Bolton, who, prior to his death in 1848, with his wife were close companions of the Wilkeses in Washington society.

Among the more frequent correspondents represented in the papers are Louis Agassiz, James Dana, Joseph Drayton, Asa Gray, George Brinton McClellan, Fred D. Stuart, and Gideon Welles.

## Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in eleven series:

- [Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875](#)
- [Letterbooks, 1841-1863](#)
- [Family Correspondence, 1836-1915, n.d.](#)
- [General Correspondence, 1835-1876, n.d.](#)
- [Official Correspondence, 1862-1863, n.d.](#)
- [Exploring Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940, n.d.](#)
- [Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877, n.d.](#)
- [Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876, n.d.](#)
- [Miscellany, 1817-1921, n.d.](#)
- [Early Family Papers and Genealogy, ca.1607-1959, n.d.](#)
- [Oversize, ca.1607-ca.1792](#)

## Description of Series

<i>Container</i>	<i>Series</i>
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	<b><u>Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875</u></b>  Diaries and journals. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 2-5 REEL 5-9	<b><u>Letterbooks, 1841-1863</u></b>  Bound letterpress and handwritten copies of letters sent including official and private correspondence. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 6-12 REEL 9-14	<b><u>Family Correspondence, 1836-1915, n.d.</u></b>  Predominantly letters exchanged between members of the Wilkes family. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 13-16 REEL 14-17	<b><u>General Correspondence, 1835-1876, n.d.</u></b>  Letters received and some letters sent. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 17-19 REEL 17-18	<b><u>Official Correspondence, 1862-1863, n.d.</u></b>  Letters sent to and from the Navy Department, the secretary of the navy, and the Army Department. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 20-21 REEL 18-19	<b><u>Exploring Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940, n.d.</u></b>  Correspondence (one item dated 1940), drafts of a narrative of the exploring expedition, maps, notebooks, computation tables, lists, reports, and printed matter. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
BOX 22-25 REEL 20-24	<b><u>Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877, n.d.</u></b>  Autobiography, essays and sketches by Wilkes. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 26-27 REEL 24	<b><u>Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876, n.d.</u></b>  Maps, drawings, reports, account books, copyrights, deeds, and miscellaneous material relating to property rights. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 28-30 REEL 25-26	<b><u>Miscellany, 1817-1921, n.d.</u></b>  A scrapbook, newspaper clippings, photographs, Confederate currency, maps, sketches, naval registers, printed matter, and miscellaneous correspondence. Included are three letterbooks, two of which belong to William B. Finch, the other to William C. Bolton. Arranged by subject or by type of material.

**BOX 31-45**  
**REEL 26**

**Early Family Papers and Genealogy, ca.1607-1959, n.d.**

Documents predominantly of a business and legal nature relating to the Wilkes family in England and America. Also genealogical charts, a published genealogy, and an "onomastic index" to many of the family records in the papers.

Containers 32-45 have not been filmed.

**BOX OV 1**  
**not filmed**

**Oversize, ca.1607-ca.1792**

Documents and genealogical charts.

Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed.

# Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
<b>BOX 1</b> <b>REEL 1-4</b>	<b>Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875</b>  Diaries and journals. Arranged chronologically.
<b>BOX 1</b> <b>REEL 1-4</b>	1841-1875  (24 vols.)
<b>BOX 2-5</b> <b>REEL 5-9</b>	<b>Letterbooks, 1841-1863</b>  Bound letterpress and handwritten copies of letters sent including official and private correspondence. Arranged chronologically.
<b>BOX 2</b> <b>REEL 5-6</b>	17 May 1841-30 Dec. 1847  22 Nov. 1848-16 Feb. 1850 16 Feb. 1850-17 Jan. 1851
<b>BOX 3</b> <b>REEL 6-7</b>	18 Jan. 1851-9 Dec. 1854  16 Jan.-25 Oct. 1857 5 Nov. 1857-13 Feb. 1859
<b>BOX 4</b> <b>REEL 7-8</b>	17 Feb. 1859-22 Apr. 1861  12-22 May 1862 18 July-10 Aug. 1862 10 Aug.-2 Sept. 1862 6-22 Sept. 1862
<b>BOX 5</b> <b>REEL 8-9</b>	30 Sept.-30 Nov. 1862  11 Nov. 1862-2 Jan. 1863 3 Jan.-2 Feb. 1863 2-26 Feb. 1863 4 Mar.-4 Apr. 1863 4 Apr.-12 May 1863 12-27 May 1863 21 May-18 June 1863 18 June 1863
<b>BOX 6-12</b> <b>REEL 9-14</b>	<b>Family Correspondence, 1836-1915, n.d.</b>  Predominantly letters exchanged between members of the Wilkes family. Arranged chronologically.



## Family Correspondence, 1836-1915, n.d.

### *Container*

### *Contents*

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<b>BOX 6</b> <b>REEL 9-10</b>	Oct. 1836-July 1850  (13 folders)
<b>BOX 7</b> <b>REEL 10-11</b>	Aug. 1850-May 1853  (10 folders)
<b>BOX 8</b> <b>REEL 11</b>	June 1853-Dec. 1855  (10 folders)
<b>BOX 9</b> <b>REEL 12</b>	Jan. 1856-Aug. 1858  (12 folders)
<b>BOX 10</b> <b>REEL 12-13</b>	Sept. 1858-Oct. 1862  (14 folders)
<b>BOX 11</b> <b>REEL 13</b>	Jan. 1863-Oct. 1867, May 1887  (12 folders)
<b>BOX 12</b> <b>REEL 14</b>	July 1895-Oct. 1915  (7 folders) Undated (3 folders)

<b>BOX 13-16</b> <b>REEL 14-17</b>	<b>General Correspondence, 1835-1876, n.d.</b>
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Letters received and some letters sent.  
Arranged chronologically.

<b>BOX 13</b> <b>REEL 14-15</b>	1835-1856  (22 folders)
<b>BOX 14</b> <b>REEL 15-16</b>	1857-1862  (22 folders)
<b>BOX 15</b> <b>REEL 16</b>	1863-1870  (10 folders)
<b>BOX 16</b> <b>REEL 17</b>	1871-1876, n.d.  (6 folders) Fragments, n.d.

<b>BOX 17-19</b> <b>REEL 17-18</b>	<b>Official Correspondence, 1862-1863, n.d.</b>
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Letters sent to and from the Navy Department, the secretary of the navy, and the Army Department.  
Arranged chronologically.

## Official Correspondence, 1862-1863, n.d.

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 17	6 July-18 Dec. 1862 (8 folders)
BOX 18	19 Dec. 1862-11 May 1863
REEL 17-18	(7 folders)
BOX 19	12 May-30 July 1863, n.d. (4 folders)
BOX 20-21	<b>Exploring Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940, n.d.</b>  Correspondence (one item dated 1940), drafts of a narrative of the exploring expedition, maps, notebooks, computation tables, lists, reports, and printed matter. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
REEL 18-19	
BOX 20	Correspondence, 1940
REEL 18-19	Maps, Antarctica and Hawaii Narrative Bound volume, 1838 Shortened copy, 1838 Notebooks Use of astronomical instruments, [1828?] "Instructions to New Officers on Methods of Surveying Used in the Expedition," 1858 Observations Weather and tidal observations, 1839 Journal of tides, air, and water observations, 1839-1840
BOX 21	General, 1841
REEL 19	Columbia River, n.d. Publications "Computations Concerning the Pendulum," 1841 Correspondence on publications concerning the expedition, 1842-1862 <i>Zoology</i> , by Titian Ramsay Peale, introduction to, 1846-1848 Reports American Philosophical Society and the United States Naval Lyceum, 1836 Joint Committee on the Library, United States Congress, 1858-1859 Soo Loo agreement, 1842 Surveys, original list of islands discovered and surveyed for the first time, n.d. Naval hearings, charges and defense of Wilkes, 1842, 1847 Miscellany, 1861-1863, n.d.
BOX 22-25	<b>Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877, n.d.</b>  Autobiography, essays and sketches by Wilkes. Arranged by type of material.
REEL 20-24	
BOX 22	Autobiography
REEL 20-21	

## Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877, n.d.

### Container

### Contents

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	Manuscript
	Vols. 1-8
	(4 folders)
BOX 23	Vols. 9-10
REEL 22-23	
	Typescript
	pp. 1-300
	(3 folders)
BOX 24	pp. 301-882
REEL 23	
	(6 folders)
	Essays and sketches
	Report on the examination of the Deep River District, North Carolina, 1858
	(2 folders)
	"Theory of the Winds," 1855
	(2 folders)
BOX 25	"On the Circulation of the Oceans," 1859
REEL 24	
	"Visit to Tunis" and "The Housewife," 1859
	"The Student's Lamp," "In Turn," and "Christmas Story," 1859
	"On Postal Arrangements," "How I Was Cured of Going to Fires," and "Sketches of Biography," 1859
	"Some Days in the Session," 1877
	"Reasons for Taking the <i>Vanderbilt</i> Under Command," 1863
	"A Diary From the South Sea Islands," n.d.
	Description of a trip through the Midwest, n.d.
BOX 26-27	<b>Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876, n.d.</b>
REEL 24	
	Maps, drawings, reports, account books, copyrights, deeds, and miscellaneous material relating to property rights.
	Arranged by type of material.
BOX 26	Maps and papers relating to Dauphine and Susquehanna Coal Co., n.d.
REEL 24	
	Drawings of blast furnaces, scales, and coal kilns, n.d.
	Map indicating Wilkes property in Washington, D.C., n.d.
	Report on the High Shoals property in Gaston County, N.C., n.d.
	Account book, 1870
	Bills, checks, receipts, 1850-1873
	(1 folder)
BOX 27	(3 folders)
REEL 24	

Copyrights, deeds, property rights, 1833-1876, n.d.

**BOX 28-30**  
**REEL 25-26**

**Miscellany, 1817-1921, n.d.**

A scrapbook, newspaper clippings, photographs, Confederate currency, maps, sketches, naval registers, printed matter, and miscellaneous correspondence. Included are three letterbooks, two of which belong to William B. Finch, the other to William C. Bolton.  
Arranged by subject or by type of material.

**BOX 28**  
**REEL 25**

Bills, letters, and notes relating to the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1867-1869  
Navy registers, 1828-1829, 1831, 1845  
Coast Survey, 1855  
Court-martial defense of Wilkes, 1864  
*United States v. S.S. Peterhoff*, 1864  
Maps and papers relating to Deep River District of North Carolina, 1851-1857, n.d.  
Biographical sketches of Wilkes, 1912, n.d.  
*Trent* affair, monographs, 1862-1865, n.d.  
"Winds and Currents of the Sea," by Matthew Fontaine Maury, 1851  
Confederate money and bond

**BOX 29**  
**REEL 25-26**

Photographs  
Scrapbook  
General, 1846-1921, n.d.  
Newspaper clippings  
(3 folders)

**BOX 30**  
**REEL 26**

Letterbooks

Finch, William B.  
11 Dec. 1817-9 Dec. 1818  
4 Nov. 1823-11 May 1824  
Bolton, William C., 13 June 1839-9 Mar. 1841

**BOX 31-45**  
**REEL 26**

**Early Family Papers and Genealogy, ca.1607-1959, n.d.**

Documents predominantly of a business and legal nature relating to the Wilkes family in England and America. Also genealogical charts, a published genealogy, and an "onomastic index" to many of the family records in the papers.  
Containers 32-45 have not been filmed.

**BOX 31**  
**REEL 26**

Agreements, appraisals, building estimates, debt records, letters, receipts, inventories, termination of trusts, 1669-1814  
"Onomastic index," a partial index of the Wilkes family parchments and other family records contained in the papers, n.d.  
Wilkes chronology, 1959  
Genealogical notes pertaining to the Wilkes family, typewritten copies, 1728-1869

## Early Family Papers and Genealogy, ca.1607-1959, n.d.

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 32-45 not filmed	Agreements, bonds, deeds, mortgages, orders-of-court, apprenticeship papers, assignments, deeds, land grants, marriage contracts, mortgages, ca.1607-1792, 1861, 1870-1873 <a href="#"><i>See also Oversize</i></a>
BOX OV 1 not filmed	<b>Oversize, ca.1607-ca.1792</b>  Documents and genealogical charts. Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed.
BOX OV 1 not filmed	Early Family Papers and Genealogy  Documents and genealogical charts, ca.1607-ca.1792 ( <a href="#"><i>Containers 32-45</i></a> )